

Stars in Stewart

"They come." John Angus turns back to his beer.

"They'll go"

BY DAN'L LaROCQUE

In the movie *Julia*, Vanessa Redgrave stunned the critics — out to get her at any cost — with her wrenching portrayal of a cool, determined woman who used bluff, bravado and blind courage to gain her ends in a struggle against inevitability. The power of her performance stampeded over the political prejudice of the Hollywood establishment and, kicking and screaming even after the fact, they voted the Maoist an Academy Award.

But the beat-up plywood hut with the bare light bulb and spastic propane heater, snuggled near a not-to-be-identified house in Stewart, British Columbia, is some 1,400 km north of Vancouver and a long way from a movie set. And the critics here are tougher. All the cool, bluff, bravado and blind courage that won an Oscar couldn't protect Redgrave's three jacks in a game of seven-card stud, Stewart-style (no wild cards except the one-eyed jack, king with the axe, three of spades if the corner's bent, and any cards with mud on them). A longshoreman, a truck driver, a store manager, the mayor of Hyder, Alaska, and five acés were balefully unimpressed by either one Oscar or three jacks. Redgrave, tucked behind the green felt so her plastic glass isn't too far from the wine bottle with the spigot, may make enough

money on one picture to cripple some countries; here, in Caesar's Palace North, she had to break a buck to pay the pot, and politics be damned. Great actors, they'll tell you in Stewart, don't necessarily make great poker players. And \$15.25 from Vanessa Redgrave spends just as easily as \$15.25 from the guy next door.

Redgrave wasn't in town to blow her salary on poker; along with Donald Sutherland, Lloyd Bridges, Richard Widmark, Christopher Lee and a mass of others, she was there to shoot exterior scenes for the Canadian-British production of Alistair MacLean's *Bear Island*, a movie that will end up, with a budget of \$9.3 million that's climbing fast, the most expensive ever shot in this country.

The screenplay of *Bear Island* merely waves to MacLean's novel on the way by. The author of *Force Ten from Navarone*, *Ice Station Zebra* and a shelf full of other adventure novels may leave the theatre in a state of catatonic shock when he sees Selkirk Films' version. But if *Bear Island* has been moved from the Barents Sea in the book across a continent to Stewart; if the ratty, battered old trawler *Morning Rose* of the book (more suited for sinking than cinema) has turned into a 3,900-ton luxury cruise liner; and if action sequences tucked into the film never crossed the

author's imagination, the people of Stewart aren't about to quibble: from October through January, Selkirk was spending an estimated \$15,000 a day in a town nearly flat on its financial face.

Stewart is tucked into the armpit of the Alaska panhandle, about two-thirds of the way from Vancouver to Whitehorse, Y.T. If you're following lines of latitude, it's roughly parallel to Peace River in Alberta and somewhat north of Flin Flon in Manitoba. For 75 years it's been a yo-yo town, with the price of gold and copper dictating whether it was thriving, near death or in remission. After the Granduc Copper Mine shut down in 1978, the population plunged from 1,200 to the current 450, give or take a planetload out.

Bear Island was the latest remission. The Selkirk movie, 40% British-owned, 60% Canadian, bound by contract with the Canadian Film Development Corporation to be filmed in this country for our tax-deductible status, and Stewart, bound by reality to an indefinite economic depression, was a marriage made in Victoria, B.C., where the provincial government barraged Selkirk with a series of offers it couldn't refuse.

Selkirk needed glacial ice for *Bear Island*: Stewart is flush in the heart of glacier country; it

needed mountains: Stewart is nestled among hundreds; it needed suitable accommodation for international stars: the Granduc company houses lay idle; it needed a seaport for the new version of the *Morning Rose*: Stewart's port was ideal; the film needed labor, tradespeople, drivers, office space: Stewart had them all.

When Selkirk finally announced it would be shooting around Stewart, the mayor was so overwhelmed he took a vacation in Hawaii. Merchants gave up wringing their hands to use them in dusting off wares they'd feared would haunt them forever; copies of MacLean's books, including many of *Bear Island*, were hastily imported. The King Edward tavern and a vacant store next door were prepared for use as office and art department. The Granduc houses were dusted, washed and waxed to await the boatload of expensive furniture rented in Vancouver. Dozens of bubble-gummers, lusting to be groupies but robbed of any chance until now, stood in front of their mirrors by the hour practising their screams. The more pragmatic trappers in town headed for their traplines early.

It didn't last. Easy come, easy go is a way of life for the permanent residents of Stewart. Those who remained when the itinerant miners wandered



Bridges: electric socks



Widmark: "a nice guy"



Sutherland: left alone



Redgrave: plucked at poker

off to other Stewarts in other places are — like the poker players — not easily impressed. Old Scotch John Angus, who hasn't seen 80 for a long time, doesn't own his stool in the King Edward hotel lounge. But anyone who'd dare use it from opening time until supper faces the tar-and-feather express out of town. John sees everything through the beer in his glass, but says little.

On this day, Richard Widmark is sitting at a table to John's left, in intense conversation with a member of the film crew; Christopher Lee is tucked in a back corner alone, going over his script; Donald Sutherland has just popped his head into the bar, then popped back out again. At the head of a cluster of tables, Vanessa Redgrave is holding court with crew members and in the coffee shop around the corner, Lloyd Bridges is chatting to a crowd of citizens. Scotch John knows they're there, and he knows who they are. And after several minutes of concentrated thought and communion with his beer glass, he slowly swivels toward my question:

"They come," he allows with a creaky shake of the head, then turns back to his beer. Several moments later, having apparently made a decision, he swivels back once more.

"They'll go," he pronounces, and the interview is over. So say they all. After the initial shock and excitement of an invasion of 120 movie people, Stewart has returned to its own stoic niche. Bridges, who seems to know half the population of the town by name, is just another neighbor now, his affability and penchant for people serving to make only his electric socks an object for awe. Sutherland, they leave alone: when introduced to the editor of the local newspaper (while breakfasting on two poached eggs on toast) Sutherland swung out of his chair and stalked off, one egg short of a load. On the assumption that Barry Burgess the editor will be around long after Sutherland the actor has left, the townsfolk shrug and leave Sutherland to his own company.

Lee rarely mingles, even with the crew; everyone speaks to Redgrave, but it's more functional than friendly. Widmark is rarely seen. Selkirk, Stewart's attitude implies, is here and it's good for the town, but when it leaves, life will go on.

There are small conflicts: the manager of the local theatre is miffed when Selkirk starts playing top films at the Masonic Hall and invites everyone in town; the problem is solved when the company starts renting the theatre for some of the films. Jon Spires, president of the chamber of commerce, grumbles mildly that "they make us jump for our money — they're very demanding," but with around 65 Stewart workers drawing top wages from Selkirk, it's a giggling complaint, and Spires concedes that.



Tucked into the armpit of the Alaska panhandle, Stewart was an unlikely site for a northern Hollywood. But the B.C. government gave Selkirk Films a series of offers it couldn't refuse

Museum curator Mary Schindel is not overly delighted when Widmark wants to be helped off with his coat, but confesses "he's a nice guy and besides, he likes the museum." A couple of tires are slashed on one of the trucks, but in a masterful sampling of public relations, Selkirk quickly lays the blame on "some Vancouver friends of one of our cameramen ... unsavory lot, those. Certainly wouldn't be anyone from town." There is one fistfight during Selkirk's entire stay: no one from Stewart is involved.

Heaven knows, Selkirk had enough problems filming in Stewart without conflicts with the townspeople. Shooting had to be finished in time for the arrival of the Soviet cruise liner *Lyubov Orlova* — to become the *Morning Star* after the paint dried — and the weather, unforeseen situations and a stunning tragedy conspired to threaten the deadline.

A helicopter is stranded on a mountainside by bad weather, and although no

one is hurt and its location is known, it's three days before it can be recovered; film snaps in the cold of the worst winter in the Stewart area in five years; motors break down, scenes have to be reshot when a hovering copter — trying to whisk tracks from the snow — scatters garbage hither and yon and crew have to wade through belt-deep snow to clean up.

And then, on the final day of shooting — on his last flight before leaving for a holiday in Las Vegas and Hawaii — Stewart helicopter pilot John Soutar, 33, is killed in a freak accident when his machine piles into another on the landing pad ... three feet from completion of his work with Selkirk.

The tragedy and the attendant publicity brought to a head one of Selkirk's major problems, and solidified the town and the company against what they both construed to be a common enemy: the news media.

Bear Island was plagued at the outset with unfavorable and — in the words of production supervisor Brian Burgess — "irresponsible" media coverage. One national magazine reporter was thrown off the *Bear Island* set under threat of imaginative body-mangling. After a spate

of inaccuracies on basic fact, the *Bear Island* people began to pretend there were no such things as reporters, and the townspeople joined the mediaphobic boycott. Desk clerks at the hotel refused to pass on calls when the chopper went down early in the filming because, says the King Edward hotel's Freddie Trehearne, "they're boors, rude, insulting and besides, they never get anything right."

But it was the controversial *Lyubov Orlova / Morning Star* that finally displaced Selkirk and its stars as the prime topic of conversation, controversy and juicy rumor in Stewart. The ship — ironically named after a famed Soviet comedy actress — was to house the entire cast and crew for three weeks while shooting went on off the Alaskan coast. Canadian seafarers screamed foul: why not a Canadian ship and Canadian crew? Right-wingers from across the country picked up on the national wire service story ("... which was never checked with us," groans Brian Burgess), and *Bear Island* got a black eye before its people ever touched a gangplank. The fact that no available Canadian ship could handle the needs of the film was, it appears, no defence. And the Soviets, who charged \$6,000 a day — plus vodka — weren't about to hand their gem over to Canadian seamen. There were nice rumors, good for hours over coffee; Canadians would block her sailing; she'd be blockaded, harassed at sea, boycotted in Canadian ports.

None of it happened, of course. The ship sat in port for three days while Stewart's citizenry, Canadian dollars clutched in their fists, piled aboard to buy fur hats at \$45, silver souvenirs, ashtrays and anything else that looked as though it might have been made in the Soviet Union. Dour, highly military personnel with constantly probing — and ever-unsmiling — eyes appeared everywhere; a 6-foot-and-plenty female mountain in a Soviet merchant marine uniform terrified half the town by turning up high over the shoulder during close examination of the souvenirs.

For the cast of *Bear Island*, Stewart itself was, well ... different. "It's the toughest location I've ever filmed at," says Burgess, a veteran of several continents. "Coldest I've ever been on location," says Bridges from somewhere inside the biggest parka I've ever seen.

Some years ago, Linda Lovelace arrived at Calgary International Airport on a promotion trip for her latest movie. The star of stage, screen and dingy back rooms was greeted with a Lincoln Continental for her personal use. She balked, demanding — and getting — a Cadillac. The felicitous of fame.

One early morning in January, in Stewart, B.C., Vanessa Redgrave stood huddled in front of the King Eddie awaiting her limousine, and did not

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under the circumstances: I stole the flag and patriated it to the flagstaff at the Stewart town hall.

The Americans were enraged, the British go-betweens embarrassed, the Soviets in turn bemused, angry and insulted, and the Canadian rearguard smug. About 40 stony-faced ship's security staff searched cabins, lockers, and one other; the British perspired a lot, and the Americans sat in their day-cabins pondering the most painful methods of retaliatory mayhem. The Canadians drank vodka, made strained small talk, and watched the door.

All in the end to no purpose; the lanyard on the Stewart flagpole didn't work, so the hammer-and-sickle never did flutter over the town. The Soviet security people paid little heed to the whistling Canadian carrying the brown paper bag back up the gangway; it took only four of his friends to restrain Mayor Benedict from strangling the bag-bearer when he discovered the borrowed flag was inside. After several toasts with fine champagne, the representatives of the three Western nations agreed that it was all a joke, but one that was regrettably lost on the Soviets.

Still, after more bottles were opened, universal goodwill was restored, and the *Lyubov Orlova* *Morning Star* returned to festivities until sailing time. With horns

hooting, lights flashing and people actually blowing kisses — and the stars flopped glumly in their cramped cabins anticipating three weeks at sea with no place to go to be alone — the *Morning Star* pulled out just after midnight, January 8. Stewart's fling as Hollywood North ended with its wake, and the yo-yo slipped again out to the end of its string.

"It'll be nice to have things back to normal," Spiers mumbles over his drink, but he isn't convincing. Stewart again is back to its enigma: chrome shiny supermarket on one side of the main street, windowless frame building leaning like your better class of town drunk on the other. There are rumors that Paul Newman recently flew in to check locations for yet another movie, but nobody claims to have seen him; a possible television production gets the coffee club once-over, but everybody heard it from somebody else and it comes full circle with no resolution. Now, if the price of copper goes up enough to make it worth digging out of those hills. . . .

"They come," said John Angus. "They'll go."

And the only true regret is voiced on Friday nights in a battered little plywood shack with a propane heater and a bare light bulb beside a house that must go unnamed: new pigeons are hard to find in Stewart.

complain when it turned out to be a battered old Ford 4x4 crew cab . . . with a working heater. Some of the stars took a shot at being "Hyderized" for warmth: on Sundays they drove across the Alaska border to Hyder (population 70 people and three bars) to indulge in what has become an essential tradition for all visitors: the one-swallow belt of 95-proof "snakebite" grain alcohol that would bring a strong elephant whimpering to its knees. Hyder bartenders swear that none tried it twice.

Entertainment for Stewart residents is limited to a sparkling new community centre, the occasional movie, and Sunday gossip over mulled wine in wide-open Hyder; for the stars, used to the glitter of Hollywood, the movies and the museum, or perhaps a quick drink in the bar, filled in what few spare moments they had during the frantic race to finish location work before the arrival of the Soviet ship.

With Canadians, Britons, Americans and Soviets all involved in the Stewart filming, liaison people darted back and forth constantly to smooth misunderstandings before they got going. But it was inevitable that, on the *Lyubov Orlova*'s third and last day in port, xenophobia and chauvinism would have to surface. A pity, when things had gone so well, too.

With the now-*Morning Star* ready to pull out, Selkirk and Stewart found themselves with no appropriate ceremonies to commemorate *Bear Island*: Stewart's mayor, Ian McLeod, was on his Hawaiian holiday, Selkirk was frantically trying to get the ship loaded, and formalities were the last thing the company was concerned about.

But not mayor Gary Benedict of Hyder, Alaska. In what he admitted was "classic one-up scamming," Hizzoner persuaded a British liaison man to arrange for the captain to present Hyder with a Soviet flag from the ship. Assuming the captain would hand him the flag and shake his hand, then be on his way, Benedict arrived at the ship in a lumber-jack shirt to find the captain and his entire officer staff in dress uniform and medals, film executives in near-trauma and Stewartites — to his delight — in apoplexy. In a solemn, multi-toast ceremony, the flag was formally presented while Stewart's witnesses choked on the Soviets' champagne. Canada was being snubbed, in a British-American-Soviet plot.

Now, there's no point in being a Canadian unless you're going to stand on guard for your country. Fortunately, there was one of that breed aboard the *Lyubov Orlova*, namely me. I did the only thing a right-thinking Canadian could do

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